

# Journal of Student Scholarship

---

Volume 1  
Issue 1 *Special Issue (June-July 2020)*

Article 2

---

2020

## How Do College Students Justify Their Deviant Behavior?

Ryleigh Haynes

Southwest Minnesota State, [ryleigh.haynes@my.smsu.edu](mailto:ryleigh.haynes@my.smsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/joss>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Haynes, Ryleigh (2020) "How Do College Students Justify Their Deviant Behavior?," *Journal of Student Scholarship*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/joss/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by theRepository at St. Cloud State. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Student Scholarship by an authorized editor of theRepository at St. Cloud State. For more information, please contact [tdsteman@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:tdsteman@stcloudstate.edu).

# How Do College Students Justify Their Deviant Behavior?

Ryleigh Haynes<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Sociology, Southwest Minnesota State University*  
 Mentor: Cindy Aamlid

## Abstract

The goal of my project is to determine how college students justify their deviant behavior. I used a convenient sample of college students for my survey. Students were asked to report on past actions that they have engaged in and explain their reasoning behind why they did it. Previous research indicates that people are more likely to engage in deviant behavior if they can neutralize the guilt from committing the action or if they make it appear normal. The student responses will be compared to nine common neutralization techniques. My presentation will share the results of this study.

## Introduction

The start of my research began after I took the class Sociology of Deviance. I thought about how all the material that we went over was intriguing and brought out an interest to me. I noticed that there are different levels of beliefs on what is “deviant.” In the deviance class we were talking about how people think believing in aliens can be a controversial topic to talk about, in times people will think that is more of an abnormal belief. However, people still believe that those who have a bountiful number of tattoos would be classified as bad people, just because they do not have clear skin of tattoos. I think the concept of being wronged for different beliefs is ridiculous, because the different meanings and beliefs on what is seen as “deviant” have changed drastically though out time. The idea of deviance is different for each person, that is how the idea of my research started. While going through and sending the survey out to students from all over Minnesota, I wanted to have a wide variety of participants that range from college students but of all ages. The research questions that I have are how do college students justify and normalize deviant behavior? Along with which techniques were reported most frequently? The last of the few questions I have is, are the justifications similar for men and women? The few questions make what we were looking for throughout the research easier to find and to see if there really are any other qualifying factors that play a role in how people perceive deviant behavior. While these questions are to see how students react to the same issues but with different justifications. It is normal to know that most people will make up an excuse to help them get past what they did and make them feel better about the overall situation. Each of the questions bring new knowledge towards the topic of my research project. I believe that the questions are important for understanding different ways around neutralization techniques. Before people may wonder if men or women tend to feel less or more guilty based on gender. I talk about that in the results sections, but it is whether or not the person needed to do it or if they felt like they should be able to do it due to everyone else around them doing it as well.

## Experiment and Methods

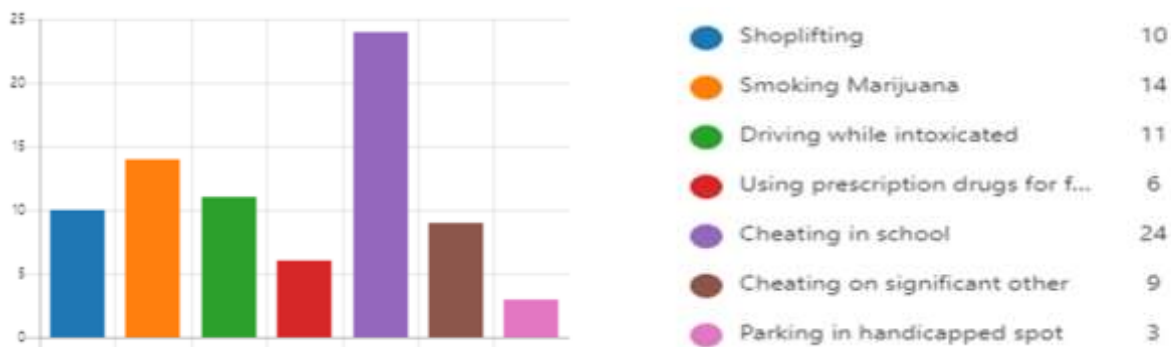
When I started this project, I got the survey questions from a survey that we had done in my deviance class a few years ago and was put together by Cindy Aamlid. When that was worded and put into the survey it consisted of seven different questions, to start it was asking age, year in school and then the participant had engaged in and explain what their initial thoughts were when doing so. I had 31 college students participate, 7 Males, and 24 Females. The participants were from several different classes at SMSU and a few different Universities. I had asked friends from all over to help with my survey and that is how I got the majority to help participate. Participants completed a survey and responded to questions about their behavior on seven different choices and check all that had applied to them. The survey was crafted on Microsoft 365 in the forms section of the app. The few questions that students were asked are the following, “Choose one of the acts you reported engaging in to answer the questions below. Which act did you choose?”, “Think back to the first time you committed the act, describe what you felt, and what you were thinking while doing it.”, “Do you think engaging in this act is wrong, if yes then why did you do it anyway, if no why do you think it’s wrong?” Next was coding the data, that came along with the instance of going through each statement that the students left and put them in a word document and go through my list of nine neutralization techniques. When I went through and made sure each statement had a code labeled next to it, I then added up each response to the correct label. Once that was done, I could find the best response for each technique to share.

Neutralization Technique
Denial of Injury
Claim of Normality
Denial of Responsibility
Claim of Entitlement
Appeal to Higher Loyalties
Defense of Necessity

## Results

Each student was asked to check all the choices that applied to them for what was deemed as deviant behavior. The highest and most used option was cheating in school with 24 out of 31 students. The second most common choice was smoking marijuana, with 14 of the 31 students reporting this. The most used justification response was Claim of Normality, which means that the students are claiming to an area where they see as something that is done in the normal day world frequently. It has no background history on why it shouldn’t be allowed, because of the fact that people have always partaken in that activity. The questions that referred to how students justify their actions was an area where they were allowed to write in and explain why they decided to do whatever actions they checked off. That is how I answered my first research question which was how do college students justify their deviant behavior? That clearly answers how they do, since claim of normality is the most used, we see that students think that there is a way around feeling fully guilty and that is through making it normal that they are doing it. They would justify their actions through the role of saying it was done because it had to have been done for them to pass the class, along with that it is normal because everyone else does it, so why can’t I? I think this is a very normal response for people when they are trying to save face. It is something that people have done since they were little, and I find that intriguing. The fact that it has been found so normalized is what makes it seem less deviant in some people’s eyes. The coding was meant to find out how people justified each action, it brought reason behind why and what people think about when they make decisions. The nine different neutralization techniques that I had brought more understanding for what people can choose to respond with. Appeal to higher loyalties is normalizing behavior or beliefs by insisting the interests of a higher principle are being served. Denial of injury is acknowledging responsibility by insisting that there

is permissible because no one is injured or harmed. Claim of normality is that they want to be successful like all those others who do it. Denial of responsibility blames social conditions or bad advice from coworkers. Condemning the condemners is characterized as hypocritical. Claim of entitlement is them saying they worked hard all their life and they deserve this extra benefit. Denial of victim is to reconceptualize the victim as having deserved it or brought on the behavior. Defense of necessity is that they had no choice, and they need to fulfill their self-centered needs. Those are the nine different techniques and I had five for denial of injury and those covered the moment where they claimed they didn't hurt anyone, and it was not going to affect anyone if they were just going from point A to point B. Claim of normality had fourteen people use that as their justification process and that is the most common way of making yourself feel better about the choices that you make. Denial of responsibility had one person use that as how they chose to act out in what they wanted to. Claim of entitlement had three people use that term. Only one person used appeal to higher loyalties. Lastly for what people used as an option was defense of necessity with five people. My other research question was do males and females justify their actions similarly? After seeing the difference in answers regarding what they responded to. I saw that men seemed to feel less guilty and more okay with how their decision played out. For females, I saw that they felt worse about the decision that they had made. I think that the two differences show how people think about how they make a decision.



**Figure 1: Which of the following acts have you ever engaged in? (Check all that apply)**

## Conclusions

After conducting this research project, I had learned that there are many different ways to justify why you do something and I find that to be the most interesting. The way that mostly everyone who had participated in my study had different responses towards what they had done was intriguing as well. I had a feeling that cheating in school would be one of the most common choices, that is because it is less deviant than let's say driving while intoxicated. That is because there are more serious consequences for driving while intoxicated rather than cheating on a test or a homework assignment. That is more likely the reason I hadn't had that many results that were in that category. I have the feeling that people wanted the easy option so they would not have to explain something that may make them uncomfortable or feel more guilty about said decision. College students normalized their behavior to account for their actions and the techniques used for normalizing behavior were claim of normality, denial of victim, claim to entitlement,

appeal to higher loyalties, denial of injury, denial of responsibility, and defense of necessity. The most common neutralization for their actions is that college students tend to back up their justification with why they made the decision to follow through with an action. Each technique that was chosen went along the lines of why people normalize their decisions and the way they act on them. The most common neutralization technique that was used was claim to normality, or everyone else is doing it. Everyone seems to find a way to make themselves feel better about their choices by backing them up with either "everyone else does it", or "no one got hurt." Many students did feel guilty for their actions after they did it. Students had mentioned that they had felt guilty of their actions, most of those had to do with cheating in school, another had to do with being nervous about smoking marijuana, a few others were also nervous about being pulled over while driving intoxicated. The differences between college men and women in responses are that men and women had the same justifications for how they acted on an urge. However, more men felt okay with their decisions, but did feel little guilt. Women tend to feel more upset about how they acted on their response to why they did what, many felt anxious when doing whatever it was that they were doing. A few final comments and ideas that I have on this topic is that I noticed most out of the justifications that students used for their actions were about how they felt after and for how they could have found other ways to go around a decision. Another idea I had was that if I were to change anything or go further into this topic it would be to survey people outside of college and get other opinions on what they find to be deviant. This would be an interesting way to get opinions of all ages to really see how people determine someone may seem deviant or not. I think by also asking all ages these questions, it could give us insight into what acts they had engaged in and see what their responses would be. Otherwise, the way that the research turned out for the presentation was a success.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Professor, Cindy Aamlid for all of her guidance and her help with this research project. Everything that she did for me was very beneficial for the outcome of the research and with the making and findings for the questions for the survey that asked college students from all over the state. She had done a wonderful job being my mentor and guiding me into scholarly success.

## References

1. Bogle, Kathleen A. 2011. "Is the College Campus a Safe Haven for Drug Dealers?" *Symbolic Interaction* 34(2):309-311
2. Benson, Kari, Kate Flory, Kathryn L. Humphreys and Steve S. Lee. 2015. "Misuse of Stimulant Medication among College Students: A Comprehensive Review and Meta-Analysis." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 18(1):50-76
3. Crown, Deborah F., and M. S. Spiller. 1998. "Learning from the Literature on Collegiate Cheating: A Review of Empirical Research: JBE JBE." *Journal of Business Ethics* 17(6):683-700
4. Cutler, Kristin A., PhD. 2014. "Prescription Stimulants are "A Okay": Applying Neutralization Theory to College Students' Nonmedical Prescription Stimulant use." *Journal of American College Health* 62(7):478
5. Halnon, Karen B. 2001. "The Sociology of Doing Nothing: A Model "Adopt a Stigma in a Public Place" Exercise." *Teaching Sociology* 29(4):423
6. Kaptein, Muel, & Martien van Helvoort. 2019. A Model of Neutralization Techniques. *Deviant Behavior*, 40(10), 1260-1285.

7. McCarthy, J. G., & A. L. Stewart. 1998. Neutralization as a Process of Graduated Desensitization: Moral Values of Offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 42(4), 278-290.
8. Miller, Peter G., 2005, Scapegoating, Self-Confidence and Risk Comparison: *The Functionality of Risk Neutralization and Lay Epidemiology by Injecting Drug Users*, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Volume 16, Issue 4, pp 246-253.
9. Murdock, Tamera B., Jason M. Stephens, 10 - Is Cheating Wrong? Students' Reasoning about Academic Dishonesty, *Psychology of Academic Cheating*, Academic Press, 2007, pp 229-251,
10. Sykes, Gresham M. & David Matza. American Sociological Association: Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency. *American Sociological Review* Vol. 22, No. 6 (Dec., 1957), pp. 664-670
11. Thio, Alex, Calhoun, Thomas C., Conyers Addrain, 2010, "Reading in Deviant Behavior", Sixth Issue
12. Vieraitis, Lynne M., Nicole Leeper Piquero, Alex R. Piquero, Stephen G. Tibbets, & Michael Blankenship. 2012. Do Women and Men Differ in Their Neutralizations of Corporate Crime? *Criminal Justice Review* 37(4): 478-493.